

In the following short article, Doug Silsbee, a business consultant and coach, offers detailed advice on how to set up a developmental coaching program with subordinates.

— **Editor**
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Getting the Best from Developmental Coaching

by Doug Silsbee

While developmental coaching isn't possible within every supervisory relationship, the loyalty and learning that can result make it well worth exploring. To do it successfully, you and the employee will need to undergo a mind shift. Realize that this mind shift is not automatic and will develop over time. Once the shift occurs, however, you will become a support and resource for the employee, and you will learn how to put your role as representative of organizational authority on hold. While this type of coaching does require work, the rewards of this redefined relationship are enormous.

Paying attention to a few practical guidelines can greatly increase the probabilities that real developmental coaching will work. These guidelines are:

- **Invite your employee into a coaching relationship.** Discuss with him that you'd like to make some time available to him to support his learning in areas that are of interest to him. Offer to be a support and a resource to him, and make the distinction that you are focusing on his learning and objectives. Don't be put off if the employee appears skeptical or doesn't immediately jump on the opportunity. It may take a while to build trust; be willing to start small.
- **Ask the employee how you can be most helpful, and encourage her to define what she needs from you.** When the employee begins to define the territory that the conversation will cover, she develops ownership in the process and begins to experience you as a support and resource, rather than as a boss.
- **Be clear in your own mind, and explicit with the employee, that these coaching conversations are for the development of the employee.** Reinforce that there will be no organizational consequences for what is shared in these conversations. The employee may be hesitant to trust this at first. Maintaining the integrity and trust that the employee places in you is critical to building a robust coaching relationship.
- **Of course, you must be candid and willing to say if you don't believe you can be helpful in a specific area.** Sometimes you may not feel knowledgeable in a particular area, and you may need to connect your employee to others inside or outside the organization who can be helpful resources. On rare occasions, a coaching discussion may stray into personal areas that you are not trained to handle. In these situations, you may need to discuss with your employee whether a referral to an employee assistance program or an outside resource is appropriate.
- **As openness to this new kind of relationship develops, work out the details of structure (frequency, duration of conversations, location, etc.) in ways that are agreeable to both.** Again, start small and go for early, small successes. Be clear with each other what's on the table for discussion, and what's not.
- **Give your employee evidence of your support for her.** When situations occur that challenge your agreement or require you to distinguish between serving organizational and employee goals, it can be reassuring for the employee to hear how you handled them.
- **Seek opportunities to present your employee with choice points — opportunities to discuss either of a couple of different topics or lines of discussion.** Making choices puts the employee in charge of the conversation and demonstrates that you are in service to her needs.
- **Provide feedback and encouragement when you see that the employee is taking responsibility for shaping the coaching process.** The employee's awareness of this subtext of the coaching relationship is key. Helping him become aware of ways in which he is defining his development needs, and asking for support, is empowering.

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